

February 2, 2015

To: Montana House Judiciary Committee

From: Matthew C. Brower, Executive Director of the Montana Catholic Conference

Re: Testimony in support of HB 89

Mr. Chairman and members of the committee, my name is Matt Brower [B R O W E R] and I currently serve as the Executive Director of the Montana Catholic Conference. The Montana Catholic Conference serves as the public policy arm of the Roman Catholic Church in Montana and I speak on behalf of the two Roman Catholic bishops in Montana from the Diocese of Helena and the Diocese of Great Falls-Billings.

I am here today to voice our strong support for House Bill 89.

According to the United Nations International Labour Organization's 2012 Estimate on Forced Labor, there are almost 21 million victims of trafficking and human slavery worldwide including 1.5 million victims from countries classified as "developed economies" (including the United States and Canada) and the European Union. And make no mistake, the problem is here in Montana. Modern forms of slavery (and that is precisely what we are talking about—slavery) reach into all corners of our state.

Not surprisingly, human trafficking tends to flourish in environments where there is prosperity and money to be made. At the same time, poverty serves as a major contributing factor that drives victims into situations where they can be exploited and ushered into a life of involuntary servitude. Thereby, it makes sense that as we continue to address the issue of poverty ~~both~~ locally, nationally and globally we will meaningfully impact those conditions that tend to give rise to sins against the dignity of the human person, including human trafficking.

Last year, the Vatican hosted the Conference on Combating Human Trafficking. Pope Francis, after personally meeting with human trafficking victims, addressed the conference participants stating, "Human trafficking is an open wound on the body of contemporary society, a scourge upon the body of Christ. It is a crime against humanity."

One aspect of the bill I think it is important to highlight is the way it shifts the approach the law and society have all too often taken toward those charged with prostitution or promoting it, specifically those who are themselves victims of human/sex trafficking. This bill, in applicable situations, furthers a fundamental shift under the law from categorizing such individuals as criminals to more appropriately viewing and treating them as victims.

House Bill 89 takes meaningful and substantial steps to address the grave crime of human trafficking and the serious wounds it inflicts on its victims and all of society. For this reason, Mr. Chairman and members of the committee, on behalf of the Montana Catholic Conference, I urge a "do pass" and thank you for your time.